

**A Man Travels
Light When He
Has Nothing
Left**



CALEB FAST

One

Gage Homestead, Markham

"I always knew that Tuesdays weren't my day," Howard Gage tells himself with a chuckle. Looking afar off, he slowly counts a few of the stars near the horizon. There was such an otherworldly majesty to those pinpricks of light that always made Howard feel small—but in a good way.

Shaking his head, Howard leans against the flimsy rail on his worn-out porch. Years ago, the porch had been beautiful, and the rail held firm. That was back when his grandfather—the man who started the homestead—had built it.

That was the only thing that Howard's grandfather got to do on this piece of land. Just a week after he finished building it and invited the rest of his family to move in, he was dead.

As far as anyone could tell, some odd group of brigands came in and shot him. They stole everything that was loose, and they left. Howard had been the one who found his grandfather's body out behind the house. The man had been dragged out there and shot in the back of the head. The sole things left on his body were his trousers and the Bible that was still clenched in his cold hands.

Believe it or not, that had happened on a Tuesday as well.

And now Howard had another tale to add to his repertoire of sadness. His barn was afire.

By the time Howard finally woke up to the smell of smoke it was already too late to save it. It was too late to even consider racing into the flames in order to save anything.

Not that it would matter anyway.

It was already too late in the season to replant anything. Howard had just finished bringing in his modest harvest the week before, a harvest that is now burning before his eyes. Not only that, all his equipment and his meager host of livestock was also in that old barn.

A soft coo sounds and Howard can just barely hear it over the fire. Looking to his right, he can't help but laugh again. Smiling, he thinks, "Well, I guess I didn't lose all of them."

Staring back at Howard, his favorite chicken, Hanna, is nestled at the foot of the porch. This particular hen had a way of escaping any enclosure, she also stopped laying quite some time ago. To Howard, Hanna was his sole means of entertainment on

most days, because of this, he couldn't bring himself to end the hen's life. Without her daring escapes, life would be unbearably monotonous. Today, that tendency to fly to coop saved Hanna's life.

Turning back to the fire, Howard sighs. He knew that he was just about as good as dead now if he stayed. If he survived until next month on whatever he could scrounge up, the Coalition government would kill him. Why? Because he would have failed to produce the year's quota and a farmer who can't produce is of no use to the Coalition's collection officers.

Looking up to the stars, Howard wonders what it might be like back on his homeworld. There was never a lot of food, but the idea of starving to death wasn't the main concern.

Shaking his head once more, Howard slips back into the house and packs his bag. As he does so, he picks up his grandfather's bloodstained Bible. Slipping it into his belt, Howard marches out the front door and picks up Hanna.

He didn't have anything left here.

If the weather held out, he would be able to make it to the nearest town that occasionally saw some traffic from passing starships. Looking up to the heavens, Howard silently begs God for someone to be kind enough to give him a ride. He was willing to go anywhere, even a space station would be satisfactory at this point—so long as they let him keep little old Hanna.

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